

A Report from Pyongyang, December 2011

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Until 10 December 2011, I was spending another three weeks teaching one hundred boys and ten girls aged fourteen at Kumsong College, one of Pyongyang's leading middle schools. My job was to assist them in practicing and familiarising themselves with communication in English. Put simply, this involved reading and discussing the essays in their English-language textbook, engaging them in classroom conversation on a wide range of topics, and, in informal group chats, finding out more about them, their lives and their ideas.

I left Pyongyang on the morning of 10 December and, in the afternoon, gave a presentation in Beijing to the Foreign Correspondents Club of China on what I had seen and heard. Many of the questions were thoughtful, seeking only better to understand. However, one European journalist asked, 'What is the impact of the famine?' I could only reply, 'Which famine? The only famine as such in Korea was in the 1990s.' He was unconvinced. Later, he popped up again and, not asking but insisting, declared 'There is no industry in North Korea!' I had earlier told the journalists about the visible increase in the number of cars on Pyongyang's roads in just the six-month interval since my last visit. I had also mentioned that many of these new cars were made in North Korea (the company uses Fiat technology and, having ridden in one of them, I can say it is no different to being in any mainstream modern sedan). The gainsayer was unconvinced again.

I regularly encounter this attitude when I speak to people about North Korea. It seems I or they are living in a science-fiction world, an alternative universe in which nothing is, or can be, as it seems. In a book from 2005, *North Korea: The Paranoid Peninsula – A Modern History*, the author, who is trying to get to the truth but is heavily, and disastrously, reliant on the words of defectors and refugees, describes a ‘normal day in the life of Pyongyang’. In this, he explains that shopping is a desperate activity because the shelves are so swiftly emptied (I never saw an empty shelf in any of the large or small shops I entered), people struggle to obtain socks or underwear (I cannot comment on the latter but everyone I saw at work or in the street was warmly, and some elegantly, dressed), while personal ‘phone ownership is rare and virtually every call is monitored. This last is, after all, only what one would expect of ‘the most repressive society on earth’ (the stock phrase on amazon.com from anyone commenting on works about North Korea). But in my universe in 2011, the streets of Pyongyang are awash with people using mobile ‘phones with complete abandon. In a hotel coffee shop, the waitress wanted to explain the name of a dish to me in English; she could not find it on her in-phone dictionary so she ‘phoned a friend in the hotel dining room. If the security services were listening in, maybe they did learn something (the English word ‘noodles’). Go to a cafe or restaurant and mobile ‘phones are ringing all over the place. Even schoolchildren have mobile ‘phones (the younger ones do not bring them to school but the older girls do and use them openly in the school grounds).

Elsewhere, there is an article from 2006 by Dr. Andrei Lankov, an old friend and colleague and also one of the leading commentators on North Korea. In this scholarly piece, he explains about the natural death of what he calls ‘North Korean Stalinism’. The definition of Stalinism that he offers begins with ‘a system of mass terror’ and ends with ‘a system of personal dictatorship’. The only problem is that, nowhere in his essay, does he identify anything corresponding to a system of mass terror in North Korea and, without terror, our

understanding of the term 'dictator' or 'dictatorship' must radically change. Indeed, one of the principal differences as far as I am concerned between Korea and China is that, in Korea, there has never been anything remotely approaching the regime-sponsored internal brutality of the Cultural Revolution (about which I have heard at length from my wife's family who were among its countless victims). So let me state this here and now: in all of my visits to North Korea over the past two years, I have seen not a single instance of personal or collective terror or even fear (with one exception – when a young woman was about to enter the hotel lift and saw it empty but for me – she froze in fear or consternation and, as the lift doors closed, for once I forgot that I pride myself on being a gentleman and did not try to reopen them). I contrast this with my own societies, Australia and England, where fear is omnipresent; it is, in fact, a way of life, and Britain, with its five million plus CCTV cameras is a deserved object of ridicule (see *The Simpsons* episode where Britain's example of extreme public surveillance is tried in 'Springfield' and leads to a mass revolt against the proto-fascist Big Brother society).

Fear of North Korea is deeply entrenched in certain societies, not least in Japan. A close friend in Osaka described the situation to me in mid-2011; 'we are told every day by our media that North Korea is planning to attack us with every bomb at its disposal'. I mentioned this to my teaching colleagues in Pyongyang and they could not believe anyone would be so insane (their word) as to believe this; only a madman, they told me, would even think of such a possibility, and, of course, they are perfectly correct. On a brighter note, a few days after I left Pyongyang in December 2011, I was in Osaka and I saw something I had never seen before. The local TV news had a report from the DPRK. It was a curiosity; it asked the question, 'what has happened to....?' and it mentioned a name which I do not now recall. It belonged to a North Korean newsreader and TV presenter, a woman regarded, in Japan at least, as the media face of North Korea over many years. In recent weeks, however, she had

disappeared from the screen. What struck me about this lengthy and detailed Japanese press story was that it was so lacking in any kind of hostility or suspicion. Rather, it seemed to be admiring of this woman's longevity, her force of character even, and to be showing real concern for her health. It was a rare example in Japan, or elsewhere, of viewing North Korea as a place of people 'just like us'.

By mid-December I was back at the family home in England. Within a day or so, the leader of North Korea died of a heart attack in his late sixties. I had the misfortune to catch the ITN News report on TV; it used the footage from Pyongyang but the journalist's voiceover (he was, of course, not in Pyongyang and probably had never been there) raised doubt about the genuineness of the tears of those shown weeping, raised fears about the security of the world now that a youth was in charge of a nuclear power (a nuclear test apparently makes one a nuclear power), and dismissed the deceased Kim Jong'il as 'an odious tyrant'.

The last press photo I saw of Kim Jong'il in December 2011 was of him inspecting the recently-opened Kaesong Youth Park in central Pyongyang. It is a fun park, filled with the kind of stomach-turning, spine-twisting rides that children adore, plus electric bumper-cars and other such diversions. It opens in the evenings during the week and, according to one of the schoolgirls I taught, stays open until 1am (for those hardy enough to brave temperatures of minus nine degrees or for those working nightshifts, I cannot say). The park has been an enormous success. It is so popular that in an ongoing exhibition of paintings at the Mansudae Art Studio, among all the studies of tigers, workers, and mountain landscapes, one of the major paintings is of a group of children on the most thrilling of these rides. In passing, another of the paintings in the exhibition is of the 'modern girl' of Pyongyang, elegantly and colourfully dressed, walking down a Pyongyang avenue, and fixated absolutely on the mobile 'phone in her hand.

One of the fixed ideas about Kim Jong'il is that he was reclusive, presumably terrified to go out from the safety of his tyranny, certainly terrified to leave the safety of the North. Shortly before his death, however, he had travelled quietly to the Russian Far East and had a series of meetings with the Russian president, Medvedev. The aim was to improve Korea's access to gas and other energy supplies, and, more generally, to drum up business. The North would love to see trade and investment come in from the outside; the mobile 'phone network was apparently set up with Egyptian investment, one of the most popular beers in Korea is now imported from Argentina, and there are cars on the roads of Pyongyang from every country (including the U.S.). Indeed, anyone wishing to do business with the DPRK can use the services of a gentlemanly Scots lawyer who has been based in Pyongyang for about seven years; he has a website, and an office at the Pyongyang Hotel. North Korea is not a hermit state or a paranoid peninsula. It has long-standing mutually beneficial ties with two of the most important countries on earth; Russia which literally is the powerhouse (it has all the energy) in Europe, and China which historically has been the dominant power in Asia and is now simply retaking that position. Critics may say that North Korea is an economic burden to China, and perhaps also to Russia, but the truth is that it provides a cast-iron guarantee of security to both of those states in a strategically vital part of Northeast Asia. They will not allow such a long-standing and indomitable ally to fall.

But I am remiss. We must try to remember that North Korea is the 'most repressive society on earth' and that Kim Jong'il was 'an odious tyrant'. To test these ideas, we may venture into the classrooms of Pyongyang. First point: I was frequently left entirely alone with the children, these innocent and impressionable fourteen year olds, both male and female. When a fellow teacher was in the classroom, it was for two reasons; either he or she was the teacher of this particular class and wanted to see what they were learning, or it was another teacher who would ask me if he or she could sit in solely out of a desire to learn something for

themselves (the teachers were particularly fascinated by a book of tongue-twisters that I took for them and were regularly to be seen practicing ‘she sells sea shells... ‘; they just enjoyed the pleasure of language as a game). No-one at any point in any of my hundreds of hours in charge of schoolchildren in Pyongyang has ever said to me, you cannot, or should not, say that (whatever it may be): no-one has ever said, you should not have said that (whatever it may have been). On an earlier occasion, I took a copy of The Simpsons comic book to show the students what a comic in other countries might look like. One of the teachers said, ‘Oh, that’s the one where the mother has a strange hairstyle!’ They already knew about it. Another teacher told me that he has access to Google; he is not in any special position of authority, he is just a teacher. But we must remember that this is ‘the most repressive society on earth’ and that Kim Jong’il is ‘an odious tyrant’.

What of the children’s view of Kim, then? His photo is hung in classrooms but, as far as I can recall, not in every classroom. If it appears, it is always beside the photo of his father, Kim Il-sung, and they both look just like senior schoolboys (young, short-haired, without glasses, in high-collared uniform, looking for once, stern and serious, not relaxed or happy). The most common place to see images of Kim Jong’il in Pyongyang is in the feel-good roadside hoardings (again, almost always with Kim Il-sung beside him), all bright colours, smiles, optimistic outlook. A British newspaper once reported that North Korean television ONLY shows pictures of Kim Jong’il and of the military. Really? We are back to that science-fiction alternative universe. From what I have observed, the most common image on North Korean TV is of someone, young or old, singing or playing music: no sign of Kim Jong’il, and not much of the military (except when it is providing the singers). In terms of images, we must also ponder the curiosity of a ‘tyrant’ who allows the most common public image – the lapel badge – to be dominated by his father’s image rather than his own (I have never seen anyone wearing a lapel badge with Kim Jong’il’s photo, only that of Kim Il-sung).

The book *North Korea: The Paranoid Peninsula* argues that every aspect of schooling is related back to the Kim dynasty. Of course, if one were a tyrant, this is probably what one would do. But then, here lies a mystery (the schoolboys I talked to love mysteries, as well as explorers, inventors, and strange phenomena of all types and guises, so let us delve into this one). It is rooted in the fact that in the English-language textbook used in every school across North Korea for fourteen year-olds, there is barely a single mention of Kim Jong'il or even of Kim Il-sung. Instead, there are, for example, lessons on 'Being Creative', the science of 'What happens to us when we sleep?', and ones specifically on the history of Ireland, South Africa, and the Maoris of New Zealand. In the latter, the schoolchildren are given various terms from the Maori languages to learn. They are also told about the heroic resistance of the Maoris to European colonisation and how they have worked to maintain their unique cultural identity. No mention of Kim Jong'il (not even the possibility that the Maoris may have gained their fortitude by studying his works). The mystery continues.

One of the finest speeches in the English language comes, unsurprisingly perhaps, from Shakespeare. It is not the soliloquy by Hamlet nor is it Macbeth's tortured 'is this a dagger I see before me?' It is, instead, that remarkable speech given by Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, beginning with 'Friends, Romans, countrymen...' but at the heart of which is the recurring, and increasingly accusatory and damning, refrain 'But Brutus says it is so and Brutus is an honourable man.' The schoolchildren I taught have heard about various famous names from other countries, such as Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and the great explorers like Magellan and James Cook (they have also heard of another Englishman, Chaplin, through a documentary shown recently on North Korean TV but that is just by-the-by). I did not ask them if they have ever heard of Shakespeare but on my next visit perhaps we should practice Antony's speech. They already understand irony. I know because we spent several class hours listening

to some very witty jokes, including ones using irony, which they translated from North Korean joke books (and no teacher or official ever said to me, you cannot do this!).

There are at least two major flaws in the dealing of countries like the US, Britain and Australia with North Korea. One is that they show no respect. Without respect, there can be no progress in talks and no security in co-existence. The Korean schoolchildren whom I taught in 2011 were, and are, enormously proud of their society; they see themselves as engaged in a great endeavour, still incomplete, but with constant steps towards improvement (the massive construction projects of 2011 plus the spread of mobile 'phones and computer technology are just some examples of this progress). Yet, no-one, pupil or teacher, ever made a derogatory or disrespectful comment to me about any other society (only about the leaders of some countries). At the heart of respect for others is the ability to reflect on oneself. If we were to see ourselves from the Korean perspective, what would stand out among the good and the bad? The fragmentation of our communities is obvious. The corruption of our leaders is obvious; it is not just Bush, Blair and Howard conspiring to wage aggressive war against Iraq, or the fact that Blair, instead of being on trial, is still attempting to provoke war with Iran (let us all ignore the losses in Iran during its eight-year war against the Western-backed Iraq and kill more Iranian men and women). It is not just Berlusconi with his criminal indictments longer than most inhabitants of our overcrowded and hopeless prisons. We have leaders who tell us that they are taking 'tough decisions' when what they are actually doing, because they have no solution, is further destroying our social capital, our primary asset in facing future challenges far greater than the national debt which hypnotises them presently. Looking at all this, perhaps North Korean citizens would see themselves as fortunate and feel sympathy for us; after all, they apparently retain a sense of community and they have leaders who still talk of progress despite privation, not doctors addressing a terminally ill patient with yet more harsh measures and acts of 'bleeding' (see the philosopher Jacques Rancière on

‘doctors and democracy’). But if the North Koreans were to look at our culture, our TV and film, what then would they see, and would they still pity us? I suspect they would be appalled at our addiction to horror – look at the evening’s TV and the number of programmes dealing with murder, or that sub-genre of the horror movie in recent years, ‘torture porn’. Look at the fear of citizen towards citizen; the locked doors of the aged and the caging of our children against unseen predators at every corner (read Frank Furedi’s works for an overview of our ‘culture of fear’). Are we not in the same situation that the great philosopher-critic Walter Benjamin observed in 1930s Europe, where so many members of our society are so alienated from each other and the society itself is so fragmented and failed that we sub-consciously hope for its annihilation? The society Benjamin was describing was Nazi Germany and that should give us pause for thought about how our adoration of death, misery and cruelty as entertainment, as well as our complacency in the face of our own political hypocrisy and corruption, makes us seem in the eyes of others.

The second flaw in our dealing with North Korea is the refusal to think of that country’s leader as anything but ‘an odious tyrant’. If one allows that the Kim family is not tyrannical, and that the people of North Korea willingly maintain the existing system because it offers them security from enemies with more guns and money (and aggressive intent) than they, then the entire, nakedly racist attitude towards North Korea begins to crumble; and then what would James Bond do for his next Fu Manchu-style Oriental villain? What would we all do for a pantomime ‘Oriental’, merciless, inhumane, and so utterly evil that we could all comfortably, and comfortingly, hate him and wish him ‘taken out’. If the Kim family is not populated with tyrants and madmen, then there must be another reason (in fact, a very cogent and, even for us, understandable reason) for the North Korean determination to possess nuclear weapons: it might even have something to do with our own overt hatred and contempt, that hatred and contempt which used to be directed at China a century ago, was

then transferred to Japan in the 1900s, went back to China in the 1950s, and now shines bright on Korea. But, with a leader in Pyongyang who is neither a tyrant nor a madman, the entire military logic of sustaining immense forces in readiness for an outbreak (which has never come since 1950 and, at least since the 1970s, was never even likely to come) begins to stumble. With a leader in Pyongyang who is neither a tyrant nor a madman, the entire political logic of endless sanctions begins to crumble (will they be applied to Saudi Arabia when it develops its own nuclear weapons in response to those of Iran?). Instead, with a leader who is neither a tyrant nor a madman, the possibility of giving and receiving respect, of exchanging ideas, of coming to an accommodation, and of reducing hostility and hatred, which thereby defuses the fear behind nuclear weapons, begins actually to be plausible. But, of course, I am forgetting once more. North Korea is the 'most repressive state on earth' and the leader of North Korea is, was, will be, an 'odious tyrant'. Our leaders and our media consistently tell us this, and they are honourable men.